



The Producer's Role in Director-Centric Theatrical Practice: The Professional Viewer

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Abstract: *In my research, I examine the tasks of the professional viewer (the theatre producer, manager or director) in chronological order, from the bare idea of a production to the final performance. In other words, I ask what the professional viewer can do to ensure the success of a production – to ensure its smooth and professional realisation. I investigate whether it is possible to create a linear series of tasks that doesn't merely render the work of future theatrical managers easier, but also lets creative theatre professionals follow the emergence of the production in its own world, with the joy of discovery and a possibility of understanding.*

Key words: *Producer's role, Vanishing point, Professional Viewer.*

If one is present in the world of theatre-making, but not as a creative artist, it is easy to lose one's frame of reference, what's more, it is easy to become irrelevant as a leader. I myself have struggled with this problem, until I found the title 'professional viewer', a role I often play as a producer, and which routinely shocks the theatrical profession.

My title was inspired by my early realisation that, within a theatre, I feel most at home as an audience member – and yet I have a talent for on-stage effects and mechanisms. Later, summarising my experience as a theatre manager, I could express – or even actively support – what was necessary to ensure that my 'fellow viewers' receive a more complex, powerful and flawless experience from the very moment they step into the theatre to the moment they leave.

Is there a set of perspectives through which we can appraise individual tasks, and state that we have been complex and thorough in our decision-making?

My thesis is that as a responsible leader of a theatre, we have to assume three roles in addition to the attitude of the empathetic viewer:

- I. The adventurous artist in search of new solutions (artistic considerations);
- II. The prudent financial manager (economic considerations);
- III. The PR professional, focusing on marketing (communications and marketing considerations).

The first and most important task – that has a defining, decisive importance even as a viewer:



Choosing the Play

I would like to demonstrate and detail the main topic of my statement and my research – the complex relationship between theatre management and creative theatre-making. It is advantageous to examine a task, a decision from multiple perspectives.

I must emphasise that when it comes to choosing the play, the perspective of the professional viewer is distinct from that of the amateur (hobby) viewer, since the latter only has to ponder which play they would enjoy that evening, while the former, the producer, has to weigh other, significant considerations.

What are these? Following from the ideas noted above, I am going to enumerate artistic, economic and marketing perspectives, in order to find a high-quality artistic challenge that is feasible, being within our financial means, and also raises the interest of the press and that hopefully fascinates my ‘fellow viewers.’ There are some decisive questions – in fact, most of them – that are worth examining from all three perspectives.

Artistic Considerations:

- Are the personal, artistic conditions given?
- Who else performs or has performed the play, where and when?
- Is it part of a thematic season?
- Who can be involved in it, given a role in it?
- Which artists are suited to it, who would be interested in working on it?
- How does it fit into the repertoire?
- Is it necessary to invite guest artists, or can the cast be filled with company members?
- Is the premier of interest and relevance to the theatrical profession?

Economic Considerations:

- How large is the cast and crew required, and what is the cost per performance?
- What is the cost of creating the production?
- Is it possible to involve a co-producer or marketing partner?
- Will the theatre have to pay royalties?
- How many performances can be planned in advance?
- What is the marketable price for the tickets?

Marketing Considerations:

- Is the title or the author well-known?
- Does the premier hold something special? (Visuals, guest artists, creators, etc.)
- Is it tied to an anniversary?
- Is it a world premiere? The first premier in Hungary?
- Is there a well-known art piece or product in another artistic field that can be tied to the performance’s marketing?
- Is there something in the premier with immediate contemporary relevance?



- Is there potential for professional PR?
- Can it address viewers who are not part of our core audience?

(Of course the list of questions can still be added to.)

Naturally, it is preferable to examine these questions and perspectives in relation to one another, in their pre-existing complexity. When it comes to a more expensive production with a costly, high profile guest artist, it's reasonable to plan for a high number of performances, if it can bring in significant revenue.

On the other extreme, a brand new, fascinating piece that invites the interest of theatre festivals, and offers good roles to two important artists in our company who clearly crave a challenge, might be a good choice even if it results in some manageable financial loss.

According to my experiences, a production has to be promising in at least two of the three listed perspectives, in order to be worth staging. If we want to put our decision through such a test, we might split marketing into two fields: internal marketing (towards the theatre profession and critics) and external marketing (broader, popular audiences.) It is enough to expect success in only one of the two.

Of course we can only speak of unambiguous success, if the response to the production created from the chosen play is positive from all perspectives. However, that is only ever revealed in retrospect.

These four considerations offer four different perspectives, and the three-dimensional geometry of these perspectives defines and dominates theatrical space. Ideally, these linear perspectives approach one another, and their vanishing points are in close proximity.

I know some will believe that the tasks and perspectives listed above are self-evident – but I am convinced that that reconsidering and systemising them can be helpful, even beyond the context of preparing a theatrical production.

We tend to discuss the position of the viewer in the process of theatre-making, solely in the context of planning the aesthetic effects of a production, or more recently, in the context of understanding pedagogical processes. My statement is that exchanging the amateur viewer's position with that of the professional viewer, we can interpret theatre as the model of economic as well as cultural decisions.

The professional-academic literature on the subject of international trends appears to confirm our practice. The producer is usually figured as a leader who is adaptable, who is perfectly prepared for co-operation, who has excellent communicative skills in every situations, who is purposeful, dedicated, and competent at creating and directing a team. At the same time, the professional viewer retains his sensitivity, his attitude of enthusiasm and unceasing wonder. He considers both the stage and the auditorium his home, and is capable of accepting and following both. This is the most crucial aspect of contemporary practice. Following the whole of the performance, feeling its momentum, its arc, and retaining the joy of the outside observer, but, during the same process, understanding, accepting and therefore aiding the intentions of the entire creative team. The professional viewer must know everything. He must be well-informed in the same way fans are, but not from the headlines of tabloids (those are better left to the contracted



PR-team – I will speak in detail about this in another paper.) Instead, he should gain all the information he needs by observing the whole of the rehearsal process.

The relatively short, barely seven-decade history of Hungarian repertoire theatre requires a different attitude on a producer's part than work within a company that plays en suite. This is exactly why professional dialogue keeps faltering. The profession of producers has been constantly rethinking the requirements of great theatrical cultures and the techniques that lead to success for more than a hundred years, after all, theories of acting since the very earliest bourgeois societies have considered success and profit their primary goals. Handbooks on acting and on theatre theory often cite the example of *The Versailles Impromptu*, but the piece can also serve as the basis of understanding the producer's working process.

Impromptu demonstrates that Molière successfully sidelined his authorial self in favour of his producer-self. Success was just as vital in the 17th century as it is today, and Molière, who watches his company from the outside, directing and managing them at the same time, behaves like a professional viewer. The big conflict between members of the company is all about profit and about the royal allowance. All questions about the possibilities of theatrical performance are expressed in the context of money and the company members' livelihood.

Concerning en suite technique, let us examine Mozart's singspiel *Der Schauspieldirektor* which premiered in 1786, and which also depicts the producer's difficulties in a similar way. The plot begins when "Frank, the impresario has to organise a theatre company in Salzburg, and discusses the difficulties of auditioning and hiring with his buffo singer Buff: how much should he pay each actor? Eiler, the banker recommends Madame Pfeil, his lover, and promises financial support to the whole company if Frank signs her" (Szabolcsi, 2003, 514). We know that Mozart wrote the situation around a legendary singing duel (these days only this duet is regularly performed), but let us remember that the impresario is present throughout, and he must decide who was best. He must watch, professionally, and to achieve success, popular success, he must first make peace between the singers.

With these two classic (literary) examples, I tried to outline the clearest possible version of the producer's work. This is the en suite theatre tradition, the basis of present-day Broadway and Westend theatre management, which can be taught and learned step-by-step. All handbooks and textbooks for producers are built around that situation, and in my doctoral work, I will discuss them in more detail. But now we're discussing the role of the producer working in the framework of a repertoire-based theatre, which entails different tasks than the work of a producer in the Anglo-Saxon theatre industry.

The producer working in a repertoire is a professional viewer, because he has to follow every single premier of the theatre's whole season. It doesn't matter if he personally produces every one of them, or if a different producer is contracted for each staging. He has to choose a vastly different strategy for a premier, if he can estimate the number of expected performances months before the premier.



The professional viewer does not think in terms of performances, but in terms of seasons, and as he works with a given company, he focuses on the performances contained within a season pass. The artistic considerations I mentioned earlier in my paper are even more dominant in the work of a repertoire producer than in the work of an en suite producer, since the energy and artistic capacity of the company doesn't bring success to an individual performance, but in complex and elaborate ways, builds the success of a whole season.

In the context of a repertoire theatre, the primary task of the producer in his capacity of professional viewer is to guarantee the long-term balanced functioning of the company. From the perspective of the vanishing point, this requires stable financial basis. My thesis seeks to understand how this can be provided with state support, or possibly without it, with private sponsorships or purely relying on ticket sales. Economic considerations are at a risk of entering into opaque interrelations with artistic concepts, giving ground to permanent and endless compromises and pressures – as we have seen in the works of Mozart and Molière. In order to prevent this, we have separated the responsibilities of artistic leadership and management. While the former is largely a series of improvisations (built on experience), the work related to the management industry require preparation, legal and economic order. For decades, Hungarian productions have been haunted by the question: what sort of knowledge is present behind artistic and economic achievement, behind the producer's work. "I daresay none of these cases were determined by deliberation. Artistic attraction to the topic played a much more crucial role, and an institution gave it support" (Biro, 2012, 25; Biro, 2015).

It is our task to promote deliberate planning, as our goal is more than the creation of a successful performance, it is safeguarding the unimpeded functioning of an artistic community working in a repertoire via a production environment relying on en suite technique and knowledge (Dean, 2015). Inspiration, dialogue, and reliability are all factors that promote creativity, and as a professional viewer, I can understand and intuit all of this, and from this position can move on to convince economic leadership of the same.

The goal of this paper is to give understanding on producers as professional viewers, who possess knowledge of the art of acting traditions, and are capable of using new, innovative strategies to create economic stability that allows them to function. This is the focus of all their activities.

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